

SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q What are Firefox Extensions and how do I get them?

A Firefox Extensions are little programs that change the way the browser works or add new features. Examples include colourful tabs, which enable you to see each one more clearly, an advanced advert blocker and the option to open PDF files in Adobe Reader rather than in the web browser. There are thousands of extensions for Firefox and you can browse them all at <https://addons.mozilla.org>.

Each extension will tell you which version of Firefox it works with. Installation is as simple as clicking on the big green Install Now button. The website also has links to download new Firefox themes and plug-ins, which are applications that run inside the browser to play proprietary file types, such as Flash and Windows Media Video files.

David Ludlow
Deputy Editor



david@computershopper.co.uk

ADOBE Photoshop Lightroom 1.0

★★★★★

£129 inc VAT



Adobe's Photoshop Lightroom combines a range of functions aimed squarely at photographers: image library management, RAW file processing, colour correction, retouching and export to a range of media. Adobe's use of the word Photoshop in the title is misleading as the program bears little relation to Photoshop CS or Elements. There are no creative effects or support for layers. However, in its specialist field of making photographers' lives easier and making photos look their best, in many ways it's better than Photoshop.

The elegant interface is divided into five stages: Library, Develop, Slideshow, Print and Web. You'll usually start with Library, where you can import photos from your hard disk or copy them from a memory card, rename them, apply keyword tags and various other labels and organise them according to a wide range of criteria. It's easy to flag photos for use, deletion or processing, and create custom Collections.

The Develop module is where the fun happens. Most of its options will be familiar to anyone who has used image-editing software before, but there are two key differences. One is that they're optimised to work as corrective tools for photographs. The other is that they're applied non-destructively. This not only means that the original files are always available should you wish to return to them, but also that extensive colour tweaking won't lead to a loss of colour fidelity due to quantisation errors. All edits are stored in one database and re-applied when you next open the image.

A strip of buttons provides access to crop, red-eye removal and blemish removal tools, all of which are delightfully quick and effective. The remaining editing options appear in the panel on the right. You can adjust white balance automatically, manually with sliders, or with a Picker tool to define a neutral-coloured part of the image. Next come exposure controls, which include some well-conceived options that enable you to make radical adjustments without clipping highlights or shadows. Colour-correction options are extremely comprehensive, with separate hue, saturation and luminance controls for eight tones in the

colour wheel. If the multitude of sliders is too bewildering, simply click and drag parts of the image itself to adjust the hue, saturation or luminance of a particular colour. If a face is a little too pink but the rest of the photo looks good, you can give the face a nudge with the mouse to fix the problem; it's about as close to magic as we've seen in an image editor.

The Lens Corrections palette includes fixes for vignetting (darkening at the corners) and chromatic aberrations (misaligned primary colours), but it's surprising that you can't also correct barrel and pincushion distortions. Sharpening and noise reduction are included but offer minimal user control, and the results are basic. This is a disappointment, particularly for anyone who wants to process RAW camera files, which is something Lightroom otherwise handles well with support for more than 140 RAW file formats.

The Slideshow, Print and Web modules are less remarkable, covering onscreen and PDF slideshows, various print templates and HTML and Flash web galleries. They generally look smart and serve their purpose well, although we'd appreciate the option to add custom captions to each image, particularly for web galleries.

Overall, the software is responsive, and we love the fact that simply clicking an image flips between fit-to-page and 100 per cent magnification. Another smart touch is the way the resolution drops to allow fast real-time feedback when adjusting colour filters, but releasing the mouse produces a full-resolution preview. Moving the mouse over the undo history shows a preview of each stage in the Navigator window at the top left. It's these details that can make or break the efficiency of an application, and Adobe has it spot on.

Photoshop Lightroom is apparently designed for professional photographers, but its features and price make it just as suitable for amateur enthusiasts. If you've spent £500 on a digital SLR camera, this software is likely to be an equally worthwhile investment. We were amazed at how quickly we could radically improve photos, and we anticipate doing so routinely from now on.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Powerful photo manipulation
- ✓ Elegant management tools
- ✗ Basic noise reduction and sharpening

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/Mac OS X 10.4, Pentium 4 (Mac G4/G5/Core Duo), 768MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 19250102
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk



◀ Comprehensive image managements and export options are included

SWISS SECURITY Wireless Security Suite

★★

£18 inc VAT

A wireless network is a simple and convenient way of accessing your broadband connection from the comfort of the sofa. Unfortunately, securing a wireless network can be frustratingly difficult – at least that's the premise on which this software is sold.

The idea behind the wireless security suite is clever enough. Rather than having to configure your wireless router and each individual PC separately, this software detects all the devices on your network and lets you configure them all in one go. This sounds pretty nifty, but in practice it's a pain.

After installation, the Wireless Security Suite takes over the management of your wireless connections from Windows. This needn't be a bad thing, as many wireless applications, including some wireless card drivers, do the same thing. In this case, however, the Wireless Security Suite was consistently worse at establishing and maintaining a wireless connection than Windows. In all our tests, the software repeatedly dropped the wireless connection. When we turned the Wireless Security Suite off and switched Windows'

Wireless Zero Configuration Wizard back on, the same connection worked perfectly.

The next frustration came when we tried to secure our wireless network. The product's packaging implies compatibility with a broad range of routers, including those from Linksys, Netgear, D-Link and Belkin. When you come to use the software, however, it turns out to be compatible with only 11 routers. If yours isn't compatible, the software directs you to configure it manually through the router's web management page. Configuring the router manually is the part that most inexperienced users have the greatest trouble with, which undermines the rationale behind this software.

We were also alarmed to discover that if you select Tools and then Wireless security settings, the software displays the name of your wireless network, the router's physical address and your network password: all the information required to bypass your network security. This information would be much better hidden if you used Windows and the router's



▲ Inexperienced users will struggle to configure the router manually in Wireless Security Suite

own web-management to secure the network. Whatever else we expected of this software, we didn't imagine it would be worse than having no extra security tools at all.

Swiss Security also has a built-in intrusion detector. This detects when someone is probing your PC and blocks them. This is definitely something wireless users should have, but any good firewall will provide this feature. Rather than spending money on this software, we recommend buying a good internet security suite, such as Kaspersky's Internet Security.

If Wireless Security Suite did what it said and maintained a reliable wireless connection, it might be a good option for inexperienced users who were unsure of where to find all the settings necessary to secure their wireless network. As things stand, it's just not worth it.

Karl Wright

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✗ May have to configure router manually
- ✗ Displays passwords unprotected

WIRELESS SECURITY SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 133MHz processor, 64MB RAM, 20MB free hard disk space
PRODUCT CODE 842478012075
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.swiss-security.net

Also consider...

MICROSOFT Works Suite 2006

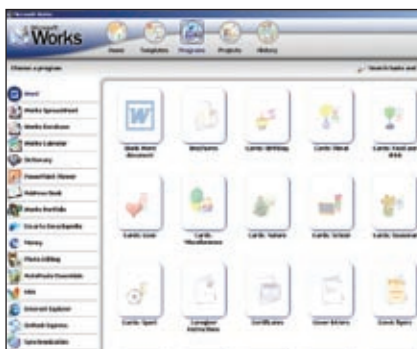
★★★★★

£43 inc VAT

Microsoft Office may be the obvious choice of office suite, but it's expensive for home users and is very business-focused. Microsoft has a more home-friendly range of software in Works Suite 2006, and all for well under £100.

The package contains Word, Digital Image Standard, Money, AutoRoute Essentials, Encarta and the organiser that glues them all together, Works. However, you get the older 2002 version of Word rather than the newer Word 2003. As the new version provides better security, more options for tracking document changes and mark-up features used to prepare content for professional databases, the presence of Word 2002 is a disappointment.

The other packages are well worth the money, though, and provide pretty much every function the average home user will need. Unless you intend to use your PC to run a small business, Works Suite is a stunning collection of software at a bargain price.



OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 SE or later, 700MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space, Internet Explorer 6
PRODUCT CODE B11-01360 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.microsoft.com/worksuite Includes Word and handy home software such as Encarta Old version of Word FULL REVIEW Mar 2006

ACRONIS True Image 10 Home

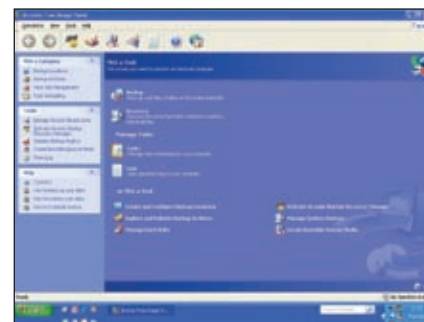
★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY True Image 10 from Acronis makes a complete copy of your PC's hard disk, operating system and all, so you can restore it to a working state easily.

It can make backups of folders and emails and even back up the settings of applications, providing you with everything you need to make sure your data is protected at all times.

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 and later, 133MHz processor, 128MB, 150MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE AT10 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.acronis.com Easy to use Some features not that useful FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



SYMANTEC Norton Confidential

★★
£40 inc VAT

Along with viruses and hackers, the big online threat that everyone is talking about is phishing. Here, criminals trick internet users into giving up personal information, which they then use for their own purposes. In one of the most common forms of phishing, the criminal sends their intended victim an email that looks as if it's from a reputable bank, online store or other business. The mail includes a link to a website that looks just like the site of the business the phisher is impersonating. When the victim logs in to the fake site, the phisher gathers their login details and uses them to rob the victim.

Symantec's Norton Confidential claims to be able to protect you against phishers. It does this by recording all your usernames and passwords as you enter them into a website. If you later try to enter the same login details into a site with a different web address, Norton Confidential warns you that this isn't the site you previously logged in to. This can be tedious if you use the same login details for lots of sites, but then you shouldn't do that anyway. If you're about to send personal details to a site

that looks like your bank's website but isn't, Confidential will warn you that the site isn't what it seems.

As well as guarding your passwords, the program monitors the websites you visit for signs that they might be phishing sites. It also has a built-in malware scanner that scans your PC and checks any files you download to see if they're dangerous.

This all sounds useful, but there are a few catches. First, the price is incredibly high for an application that's basically an Internet Explorer plug-in. Second, the program works only with Internet Explorer, and not Opera or Firefox. You have to use the least secure of the three major web browsers to enjoy the 'extra' security

Norton Confidential provides. As for the malware component, it falsely identified part of our anti-virus program (from a vendor other than Symantec) as a dangerous file. If we'd followed Confidential's advice and got rid of the file we would have damaged our anti-virus software.



▲ Norton Confidential claims to be able to protect you against phishers, but a little common sense may be just as effective

This does not mean you're defenceless against the phishers. If you get an email that looks as if it's from your bank, credit card company, an online store or a similar institution asking you to verify your personal details, ignore it. A legitimate business will not contact you in this way for this purpose. Download the latest version of Internet Explorer or Firefox, as they have built-in phishing filters. Get a good anti-virus program, such as Kaspersky AntiVirus, as it will protect you against a far greater range of malware than Norton Confidential.

Phishing has been in the headlines recently, which is probably why Symantec has brought out this software. Don't be panicked into parting with your cash, though, as the latest version of your web browser and a little common sense will protect you just as well.

Karl Wright

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✗ Works only with Internet Explorer
- ✗ Far too expensive

ONLINE SECURITY SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP, 300MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 125MB free disk space, Internet Explorer 6 or later

PRODUCT CODE 10738167-IN
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.symantec.com

Also consider...

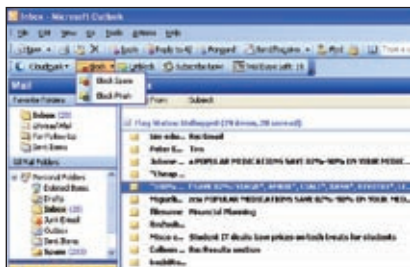
CLOUDMARK Desktop for Outlook

★★★★★
£24 inc VAT


Cloudmark Desktop is available for Outlook and Outlook Express. The software connects to a large database of spam messages maintained by other users, so it has a high probability of detecting spam. Any spam classifications you make are fed back into the database, improving Cloudmark's detection rates.

It was the clear winner of our anti-spam Labs test in *Shopper* December 2006.

ANTI-SPAM SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Outlook or Outlook Express **SUPPLIER** Cloudmark 020 7100 5224 **DETAILS** www.cloudmark.com ✓ Excellent anti-spam detection ✗ Outlook/Outlook Express users only **FULL REVIEW** Dec 2006



MAGIX Audio Cleaning Lab 11 XXL

★★★★★
£45 inc VAT


Audio Cleaning Lab 11 XXL is a great way to convert your vinyl LPs to CD, cleaning up the sound in the process to give excellent results. This version includes all the necessary hardware you need to record directly from records to your PC. It's also a great tool for music and video production, and the audio CD-authoring tools are particularly good.

AUDIO-RESTORATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** B0001WZXMK **SUPPLIER** www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.magix.co.uk ✓ Complete package for converting vinyl ✗ Interface a bit rough around the edges **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007



CAKEWALK Sonar 6 Producer Edition

★★★★★
£329 inc VAT


Sonar 6 is the best music-production software you can buy. Its professional-quality effects and instruments go way beyond those of the competition. Other packages will appeal to certain niche groups, but if you want the best of everything Sonar still pretty much rules the roost.

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP, 1.3GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space **SUPPLIER** www.dolphinmusic.co.uk **DETAILS** www.cakewalk.com ✓ Comprehensive audio suite ✗ AudioSnap doesn't live up to expectations **FULL REVIEW** Mar 2007



IZIMI



Free

Izimi lets you share your photos, videos and music with other internet users but, unlike similar services, you don't need to upload them to a central server or convert them to a standard size or format. The recipient can view your shared files in their browser without the need for any proprietary playback or viewing software, which makes your published material more widely available.

There are two parts to Izimi: a publishing application for managing and publishing your media, and a social networking website through which you can promote it and find people with similar interests. The success of any social network site depends largely on building a critical mass of users. Izimi has yet to achieve this and there is little to distinguish it from other social networking sites apart from the ability to link directly to your files.

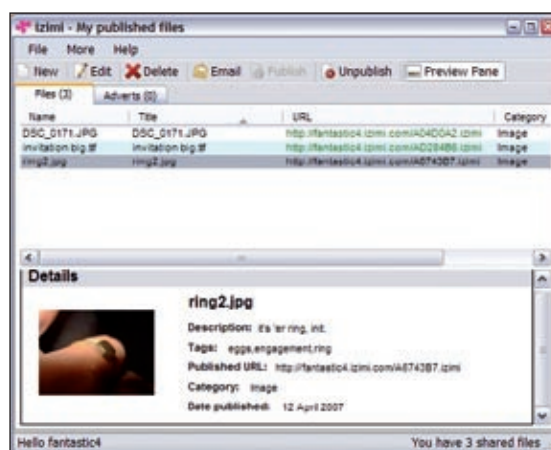
The Izimi publishing application allows you to select files from your computer for publication, remove them from publication and preview them. In practice, this means that each selected file is assigned a short Izimi URL, which you can then distribute by email, post on a webpage or insert in a blog. This URL

is a direct link though the main Izimi servers to your computer. The Izimi application then handles subsequent incoming requests for the file, serving them to the recipient directly from your computer to their browser. The source file is never transferred to a central server, and you retain complete control over it.

While the promise of keeping control of your own media while still sharing it with others through an internet browser is tempting, it's not without problems. The main one is that as the files are held locally, your PC must be switched on for others to access them. In many cases, this is inconvenient and negates one of the main selling points of internet publishing: consistently available content. Thumbnail previews are always available on your personal

Izimi webpage, though, so people can still preview your content, even when you are offline.

Bandwidth is another problem. Even with a fast internet connection, bandwidth is valuable. If you send a file to a central server, you need only transfer it from your



▲ Izimi is a publishing application for managing and publishing your media, and also allows you to promote it

computer once. If you store it on your hard disk, though, your internet connection will fill with other people's traffic whenever they request your file. This is of little consequence for small photo files, but if a large number of people try to download a 40MB video file, you could encounter problems.

Izimi is a novel concept, but it has significant flaws. By giving you direct control over your content, Izimi in effect limits its availability and puts the technical onus on your computer and internet connection. On the plus side, however, it's free and if your computer is always switched on and connected to the internet, it's an easy way to share your original files with friends, relatives and fellow Izimi users without resorting to FTP or email.

David McKinnon

SUMMARY

- ✓ Share media files in their original form
- ✗ Available only when your PC is on
- ✗ Uses your bandwidth

INTERNET PUBLISHING Requires Windows XP, 2003, Vista, 1.8GHz P4 or later, 256MB RAM, 256Kbit/s internet connection upload bandwidth
SUPPLIER www.izimi.com
DETAILS www.izimi.com

Also consider...

ROXIO
Easy Media
Creator 9 Suite

★★★★★
£33 inc VAT

PRICE
CUT!

BEST BUY This suite comes with all the media-editing tools you'll ever need. Its greatest strengths are its tight integration between all the modules and its friendly, task-oriented interface. With capable editing tools, it's great value and the best media suite you can buy, although there's not enough difference to warrant upgrading.

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space PRODUCT CODE 227000UK
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com DETAILS www.scan.co.uk
✓ Excellent media-editing tools ✗ Little reason to upgrade from Creator 8 FULL REVIEW Jan 2007

AVANQUEST
RadioTracker 2

★★★★★
£20 inc VAT

BEST BUY RadioTracker 2 makes finding new music easy by downloading tracks automatically from internet radio stations. Simply select the genre of music you like and the software does the rest. A new feature enables you to pick specific tracks you want – the simple way to find a rarely heard classic.

MP3 DOWNLOAD SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 128MB RAM, 500MHz processor, 100MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://shop.avanquest.com> DETAILS www.avanquest.com ✓ Downloads the music you want ✗ Can't delete unwanted tracks easily FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

STEGANOS
AntiVirus 2007

★★★★★
£20 inc VAT

BEST BUY Steganos AntiVirus uses software from Kaspersky, so you get the best anti-virus protection money can buy for a lot less money. In our recent Labs test (*Shopper* April 2007), it beat every other anti-virus application hands down. For Windows Vista, you'll have to buy Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6, as Steganos doesn't currently support Vista.

ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.steganos.co.uk DETAILS www.steganos.co.uk
✓ Powerful protection against viruses ✗ Not compatible with Windows Vista FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



LOGMEIN

LogMeIn Ignition

★★★★

£6 a month or £30 a year

If you have more than one LogMeIn account to deal with, accessing them through the web interface can be a pain, as can remembering your login details for each one. LogMeIn Ignition aims to take the hassle out of the process with an easy-to-use application that provides quick access to all your computers and the services their LogMeIn accounts provide. It costs £6 a month, but this charge covers as many accounts as you've got, and you can add new computers as you require.

You can install and run the application from any USB disk including flash drives, PDAs, smartphones and MP3 players. As it runs directly from the USB disk, it should work on most PCs, even those with restrictions on users installing applications. If you don't need your accounts while you're travelling, you can install Ignition on a single PC just as you would any other application.

Ignition presents an instant messenger-style view of your computers. Its clear interface shows each PC's online status, the type of LogMeIn it's running (free, Pro or IT Reach) and if it's ready to receive a connection. This handy list makes it easy to find your computers

without having to delve through multiple web-based interfaces.

Selecting a PC from the list lets you launch a remote control window. Here Ignition departs from the web-based version, as it controls the connection and session in a dedicated window. You can view your remote computer in a window or full screen, and either scale it to fit the current viewing window's resolution or run it at full remote-system resolution. Not needing a web browser is another bonus; you can run Ignition on PCs with security settings that block browser-based applications.

The result is a session similar to that provided by GoToMyPC. While you can adjust LogMeIn's performance by changing colour-depth within the window, GoToMyPC's implementation is still marginally more responsive.

Each PC that you want to control must have a LogMeIn account. For computers that use the free service, you can use Ignition only for remote control. If you upgrade your accounts to LogMeIn Pro or ITReach, you also get a file transfer button. This



▲ In LogMeIn Ignition, remote control is carried out in a window rather than a web browser

launches the standard file transfer utility, so you can copy files to and from the remote computer using an Explorer-like window.

Even if you lose the USB flash drive containing your Ignition software, you needn't worry about security. Ignition requires a password to launch, and each of your PCs needs a connection password, which you will have specified when you installed LogMeIn.

LogMeIn Ignition makes managing your remote PCs much easier, and the fact that you can carry it around with you is a bonus for anyone who often works away from their PC. The real question, though, is whether it's worth paying for. If you have only one free LogMeIn account, Ignition has little to offer. However, if you have lots of PCs that you need to access regularly, it's a useful, cost-effective tool.

David McKinnon

SUMMARY

- ✓ Runs from a USB drive
- ✓ Provides quick access to PCs
- ✗ Expensive for one PC

REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, internet connection, existing LogMeIn account (free versions available)
SUPPLIER www.logmein.com
DETAILS www.logmein.com

Also consider...

MICROSOFT Encarta Reference Library 2007

★★★★★

£28 inc VAT

BEST BUY Encarta is the best encyclopedia you can get for your PC. It's easy to search and illustrates a lot of its entries with multimedia items that really help kids learn. Its articles are quite short, but external links take you to more in-depth content. It provides a stunning balance of facts and fun.

ENCYCLOPEDIA Requires 600MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 850MB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** 83012047

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.microsoft.com
 ✓ Friendly interface and excellent multimedia ✗ Lacks depth in some articles **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007



MR SITE Takeaway Website

★★★★★

£30 for the first year; £2.49/month from then on

BEST BUY Takeaway Website is everything you need to build your own website. Its price includes hosting for a year, a domain name and a website design package. There are templates for creating blogs, guest books, feedback forms and galleries, which makes this perfect for the beginner.

WEBSITE CREATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Internet Explorer 6 **SUPPLIER** www.mrsite.com **DETAILS** www.mrsite.com ✓ Excellent value; powerful site creation tools ✗ Style options are limited **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007



DISKEEPER Diskeeper 2007 Home

★★★★★

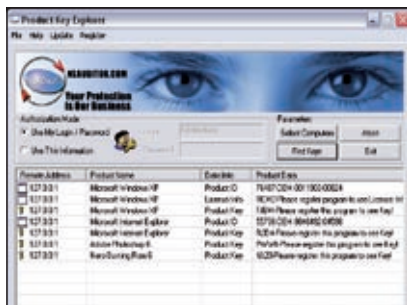
£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY Over time your hard disk can get untidy, with fragments of files spreading across the entire disk. Diskeeper 2007 puts them all back together again, improving disk performance. It does all this behind the scenes, so once you've configured it you'll never have to go near it again.

It's not the most exciting application, but it's essential for a smooth-running PC.

DEFRAGMENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP. Maximum drive size 768GB **SUPPLIER** www.diskeeper.com **DETAILS** www.diskeeper.com ✓ Efficient defragmentation ✗ Not worth upgrading from previous version **FULL REVIEW** Mar 2007





▲ Product Key Explorer searches your PC and displays all the product keys it can find

NSASOFT Product Key Explorer 1.5

★★★★★

\$15 (around £8)

Upgrading to a new PC can be tricky. Once you've worked out how to copy all your data to your new PC, you have the problem of reinstalling all your software. This could prove difficult if you have lost the licence keys. Rather than buying everything again, from your favourite utilities to Windows itself, you can use NsaSoft's Product Key Explorer.

This utility searches your PC and displays all the product keys it can find. You can then save or print them, ready to enter them again when you install the software on your new PC. Just remember to stay legal. Transferring software that was preinstalled on your old PC may contravene the licence agreement, and you will probably need to reactivate Windows.

Product Key Explorer did well on our test PC, extracting the licence keys for most of our commonly used software. It supports a comprehensive list of applications including Windows Vista, Microsoft Office, Adobe Photoshop and various Macromedia (now Adobe) products. Before you buy, though, it's worth looking at the website to make sure the product you need a licence key for is listed.

For a program that does just one thing, Product Key Explorer has some unexpected uses. If you're a system administrator, for example, it enables you to audit your users' computers to find out which software is installed on which machines. Simply press the Select Computers button, choose the machine you're interested in and enter an administrator username and password. This can also show you which users have installed their own licensed software, which is useful for tracking what's installed where.

If you've shelled out a lot for an application but have since lost the product key, this utility could well save you having to buy a brand new copy for your new PC.

Jon Thompson

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very simple to use
- ✓ Can audit a network
- ✗ Can't extract all product keys

PRODUCT KEY EXTRACTOR Requires Windows 2000 or later

SUPPLIER www.nsauditor.com
DETAILS www.nsauditor.com



▲ Remove all the clutter from your desktop with 8Start Launcher

8START 8Start Launcher

★★★★★

Free

With 8Start Launcher, you can create a customised quick launch pad of regularly used applications. This enables you to remove all the clutter from your desktop and means you never have to delve through a cluttered Start menu to look for an application. You can even change the look and feel of the pad with a range of different styles, or 'skins'. There are currently 37 to choose from, including metal, wood and a semi-transparent black glass effect that looks like Windows Vista's Aero interface.

Creating your own launch pad is a little tricky and the configuration settings can be confusing, as there are lots of buttons and windows to deal with. The basic principle is simple, though. First, you create categories, then groups for each category (think of these as sub-categories), and then you choose the programs and files for which you want links. You can link to individual files and desktop items as well as applications from the Start menu, although the fiddly file selector makes this harder than it should be. The application also crashes if you're using Windows Vista and you try to select anything from the Start menu.

Once you've finished setting up 8Start Launcher, it's very easy to use. Program icons are displayed clearly, and your categories and groups can help you find your applications by type. You can also set up individual launch pads for each user account, so 8Start Launcher is handy for less able users, as you can place the most commonly used applications within clear view.

Windows XP and Vista do some of these tasks already. Both display a list of the most commonly used applications in the Start menu, and Vista does an even better job by letting you find an application by typing a keyword. Still, if you want quick access to those applications you use a lot, 8Start works well once you have grappled with its needlessly confusing configuration.

Jon Thompson

SUMMARY

- ✓ Remove clutter from the desktop
- ✓ The skins look great
- ✗ Slightly fiddly button selection process

APPLICATION LAUNCHER Requires Windows XP

SUPPLIER www.8start.com
DETAILS www.8start.com



▲ Firefox Showcase's thumbnail view makes it easy to find the tab you want

JOSEPH DEL RIO Firefox Showcase

★★★★★

Free

If you have ever had the opportunity to use Firefox, you will no doubt know that having too many tabs open at once soon gets confusing, and it can become difficult to find the particular one that you are after. Firefox Showcase makes this job considerably easier by providing a thumbnail-view of all your open tabs. All you have to do is to click on the one you want.

As with other Firefox plug-ins, you install Showcase simply by navigating to the URL provided (see below) and pressing the big green Install Now button. The entire process takes only a couple of minutes. Once the plug-in is installed, you press F12 to open the Showcase window. This displays each tab as a thumbnail image that updates automatically every half a second. Selecting a thumbnail will take you straight to that tab, but you can also close unwanted or unused tabs.

If you don't like this arrangement, you can dock the thumbnails in a new tab, although you do then have the problem of finding Showcase. One of its best features is the Sidebar option, which docks a vertical list of thumbnails on the left of your screen for easy access. A search bar enables you to search all your open websites for a keyword, which makes it even easier to get at the tab you want.

The range of configuration options is extensive for such an apparently simple plug-in. For example, you can set the minimum thumbnail size, the colour scheme, whether the thumbnail expands when the mouse is over it, how the thumbnails are updated if the content of the tabs changes, and much more besides.

You don't need to touch any of the options if you don't want to, and Showcase works straight away. If you often work with a lot of tabs, this is an essential download.

Jon Thompson

SUMMARY

- ✓ Makes finding tabs easy
- ✓ Ideal for power users
- ✗ Configuration options overwhelming

BROWSER PLUG-IN Requires Mozilla Firefox 1.5 or later

SUPPLIER <http://addons.mozilla.org>

DETAILS <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/1810>